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ABSTRACT

Max Headroom, the computer-generated media personality, presents a good opportunity for an investigation of the degree of intertextuality in television. Max combines narrative genres (science fiction and film noir), television program types (prime-time episodic narrative, made-for-TV movie, talkshows), advertising and programming, and electronic and print media. Analysis of one channel of discourse, commercials and advertising, shows that neither advertisers nor textual theorists can rest safely on their assumptions. The text involved here is complex in the very sense that culture itself is complex, and readings of media that reduce complexity to a simplistic ideological positioning of readers are reductive and based on an overprivileging of dominance over the intelligence of viewers, and their power to expose and exploit contradictory textual elements. By over-emphasizing the hegemonic and deemphasizing the emancipatory or oppositional, injustice is done to both the complexity of texts, and their potential for encouraging critical positionings among readers. Only through empirical investigation of individuals' readings in a consistent and systematic fashion will it be possible to determine the relationships between viewers and texts. (MS)

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Intertextuality and Television Discourse:

The Max Headroom Story

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During the three years since he first appeared on British and American television the perfect Aryan visage of Max Headroom became a major media personality industry. Although it appears Max's star has finally fallen, the character had a sucessful premier on British television's Channel 4, his own talk show on Cinemax cable, a series (albeit unsucessful) on ABC, two books, a popular videocassette, a music video, a top-selling t-shirt, and a series of commercials for Coca-Cola, in which the "computer-generated" star replaced another media darling, the ever-affable Bill Cosby. Variety (Daniels, 1986) was excited enough about the character to speculate Max could end the "doldrums" of the U.S. cable networks, by providing a colorful and unique progamming concept for cable, which has suffered from a lack of identity in comparison with the broadcast networks.

As the character diffused into the culture at large, it took on new and increasingly bizarre features, like a 4th-dimensional cubist portrait. Variations of the text soon began to appear in other branches of the media. Shortly after Max made an appearance on the David Letterman show, the host's microcephalic counterpart, Larry Bud Melman (himself a fictional character), put in an appearance as "Larry Bud Headroom." Garry Trudeau appropriated the image as a satirical portrait of the president as "Ron Headrest," a wisecracking simulacrum created by the White House staff to stand in for a chief executive who is unable to deal with the responsibilities of his office. A supermarket tabloid (The Sun) entered Max into the presidential discourse through a cover story

assessing his potential as a candidate, claiming that as a man without either a history to haunt him, or a body, he's just the leader needed to get "the edge on terrorists and diabolical leaders like Moammar Khadafy and the Ayatollah Khomeini." (Olsen, 1987) Coke also saw the possible tie-in, and promoted Max as an alternative candidate in the New Hampshire presidential primary, complete with "fun-raisers."

All of this textual activity would appear to have piqued the interest two very different groups. The first of these is marketing executives, who had found a star without the irritating personal frailities human stars are so prone - such as punching out photographers (Max has no arms), or being rumored as having contracted AIDS (an immunological advantage of not having a body). The other, oddly enough, would be Marxist media critics, for whom the character can be appropriated as an example of the manipulation of the consumer through the mythologization of the information society; creating a "human" face from the increasing sprawl of data accumulation that threatens our privacy and individual freedoms.

While I want to emphasize that these descriptions are obvious reductions of the relative positions, they do serve to open the question of whose purposes are served by the text. In Image-Music-Text, Barthes argues that works as individual artifacts aren't to be confused with the text as a methodological field and an "activity of production" (1977, Pg. 157). In a seminal article on Text and Social Process: the Case of James Bond (1982), Tony Bennett proposes the entire range of cultural production

surrounding a body of works, including commentary and criticism, and that the unauthorized cultural offshoots of the type mentioned above be included in the notion of a narrative text. In a consideration of what constitutes the text of a <u>television</u> program, I'd like to suggest that these concerns apply as well.

In this paper, I'll make an effort to trace the history and evolution of the Max Headroom metatext, including the background of production and its profusion across various channels of dissemination. The degree intertextuality is extensive and presents a good opportunity for this type of investigation. Max combines narrative genres (science fiction and film noir), television program types (prime-time episodic narrative, made-for-TV movie, talkshows), advertising and programming, and electronic and print media. All of this activity takes place in an evolutionary process that ruptures hope for monothematic clarity or textual purity.

I'll focus in this discussion on one particular channel of discourse, that of commercials and advertising, through the aspects of the Max Headroom metatext bounded by television, and incorporate relevant commentary about the cross-channel and polygeneric aspects of the discourse. I'll utilize examples from the Channel 4/Cinemax TV movie which provides the "historical" background for the character, the ABC network miniseries, the cable talk show, and the Coke advertising campaign.

My intention here is to argue that neither advertisers nor textual theorists can rest safely in their assumptions. The text involved here is complex in the very sense that culture itself is

complex, and readings of media that reduce complexity to a simplistic ideological positioning of readers are reductive and based on an overprivledging of dominance over the intelligence of viewers, and their power to expose and exploit contradictory textual elements. By over-emphasizing the hegemonic and deemphasising the emancipatory or oppositional, we do injustice both to the complexity of texts, and their potential for encouraging critical positionings among readers.

In an enigmatic essay in Mythologies, Barthes discusses the face of Garbo as a modernist cinematic icon, an almost Madonnaesque ideal of the screen goddess as idealized love object. He sees her presence as an epiphinal moment of industrial art:

> In this deified face, something sharper than a mask is looming: a kind of voluntary and therefore human relation between the curve of the nostrils and the arch of the eyebrows; a rare, individual function relating two regions of the face. A mask is but a sum of lines, a face, on the contrary, is above all their thematic harmony. Garbo's face represents this fragile moment when the cinema is about to draw an existential from an essential beauty, when the the archetype leans towards the fascination of mortal faces, when the clarity of the flesh as essence yields its place to a lyricism of Woman. (1972, Pg. 57)

If Garbo's sculpted face on the projected screen is for Barthes an idealized moment in modernism, what does the literally sculpted face of Max radiating from the screen signify in a somewhat different era? A luminescent object, Max is a signifier which "masks" in many ways its referent. A fictional construct

brought to life in latex and fiberglass, animated by human blood, intelligence and muscle, he is not as much technology with a human face, as the image of the human face behind technology, incorporating into a ritual object the hopes, doubts, and fears of the animators. Coming from the tradition of science fiction, he generically incorporates the traditional equivocations of those who have written our "future histories."

In many ways Max resembles his fictional prototypes, the robots of Clifford D. Simak (1952), Authur C. Clarke's AI autopilot HAL, and Robert Heinlein's Mycroft Holmes in The Moon is a Harsh Mistress. (1968) In the Heinlein tale, responsible for running a 21st century lunar penal colony, the computer, by a gradual accumulation of hardware and software incorporating flexible logic and decision making abilities, "wakes up." His repairman discovers this, and the pair become unwitting revolutionaries. Mike becomes the figurehead of the revolution, in consult with his three human companions, and generates a face and shoulders visible on video, and alter-ego known as Adam Selene. He's an embodiment of contradictions, a revolutionary who's role was to serve as colonial administrator, more interested in humor than freedom, but loyal to his friends over an idealist cause.

Max, like Mike, is a tragic figure. He inhabits Network 23, and can travel to other network systems, but is ultimately a prisoner, trapped inside the artifical world of television. Like Mike, his loyalty is also to his friends, but his personality is characterized by a broad streak of infantile narcisissm. This is

a trait shared to a greater or lesser extent by his human diploid, Edison Carter, Network 23's roving investigative reporter, with whom he shares a history, but not an identity. The organizing sensibility of the show is literally schizoid, split between the hard-boiled Carter, and the fool personna of Max. Max lacks sufficient superego, has a hysteric anatomy, impeded speech, and a problemmatic sexuality.

Max Headroom was conceived not as a character, or as a plotline, but rather as a show title for a music video program. Peter Wagg, (producer of the variations on the Max Headroom series for both the talk program on Cinemax/Channel 4 and the later ABC action-adventure show) had obtained development money from Chrysalis music video show whose only defining concept was to be different from MTV, and international in appeal. Wagg says, "I didn't want a human being, because the whole point of this was to be international, and I felt that an individual presenter wouldn't travel." (Loder, 1986) It was while the concept was in negotiation with sponsors that the concept of a computer-generated character came about, the idea of video effects artists Rocky Morton and Annabell Jankel. Ultimately, the original "Max Team" became an authorship collective of four: Wagg, Morton and Jankel, and George Stone, an advertising copyrighter who came up with the concept of computer animation. Having settled on a concept, the collaborative team hired both Canadian actor Matt Frewer to play Max/Edison, and a team of scriptwriters to flesh out the concept with a history, financed by Cinemax and Channel 4, becoming <u>20 Minutes into the</u>

Future: The Max Headroom Story.

The talkshow/music video program plays off the conventions of the genre, with Matt Frewer incorporating the pantheon of talk show celebrities from The Tonight Show's Jack Parr to SCTV's Sammy Maudlin, with a heavy infusion of the smarmy newsreader of the Mary Tyler More Show, Ted Baxter, in a generic bricolage. Max calls up our popular notions of stardom, and highlights the ambiguous space between our concept of star and charcater. In the show's opening sequence, his trademark abstract kinetic/geometric background provides the backdrop for his entrance, against which a rotating five pointed star (the traditional alchemical/hermetic symbol of the human body) appears, rotating into view, containing the image of the host/star. Max continually violates the traditional deference of the star/host relationship by repeatedly affirmimg his celebrity at the expense of his guests; he yawns broadly at Sting's pompous explanation of his tourism into jazz, and begins his interview with Michael Caine by turning the tables: "Go ahead, Mike, w-w-what have you always wanted to ask me?"

Dyer discusses the method of positioning the star as an "ordinary person." He says:

> There is a sense in which the history of stars in the cinema reprises the history of the change in concepts of character and the individual... The conventional wisdom concerning the history of stars in the cinema is that there has been a shift from stars as ideas, gods, and goddesses, to stars as representatives of ordinary life, mortals, just like you and me. This is a shift similar to that from characters as embodiments of moral or intellectual principles to characters

> as 'particular people in particular places' (although only the early stars were believed to be absolute qualities). (1981, Pg. 238)

Max deconstructs the myth of star-as-ordinary-person through an aggressive assertion of his own star-nature, and his fleeting desires to be an "ordinary person, like yourself." (This said to Boy George, in full drag at the moment). This can be read in several ways; one being an ironic commentary on George's gender bending, another as a positioning of Boy George as closer to the mainstream than Max. The subtitle of his book, Max Headroom's Guide to Life (1986), is subtitled, "Adapted for ordinary people." This process, by satirically affirming the nature of the character as star object opens up the reading of star as being a manufactured object.

Another important intertextual element of the talk show is the use of music videos, which are used to interrupt the flow of conversation, and then are in turn interruped by a resumption of discussion. The videos themselves may or may not be contextually related to the content of the interview (Boy George mixed with the scratch video 19), and are an ecletic mix of pre and post MTV music video styles.[1] This continual rupture serves a number of functions, including mimicing in an abrupt fashion the role of the "house band" common to most American celebrity talk shows, such as The Tonite Show, or Late Night.

In the character history defined by the TV movie/pilot (in which the setting is both liminally displaced from the present and

of ambiguous locale), Network 23's star investigative reporter, Edison Carter uncovers a plot by the Network to perpetuate a cover-up of the company's problems with "blipverts." The blipverts (three-second ads containing thirty seconds of buying stimulation) are causing some "particularly slothful perpetual viewers" to explode due to the buildup of excess neurological pressure. The fourteen year-old head of network research and development and the board chairman[2] conspire to take Carter off the case by killing him, but desire to keep his image alive through a combination of computer graphics and artificial intelligence. The plan goes awry when Carter escapes, and the not-yet-perfected replicant (Max) gets loose in the network's computer system.

The role of television as a social and economic institution is one of the central themes of both the movie and the series, and the blipvert episodes can serve as a focal point for an analysis of some of aspects of the show which challenge corporate culture and parody the false paradise of consumerism. Scriptwriter Steve Roberts says,

> "American TV turns out largely pre-digested bunk. That's an guarantee of failure. But if someone twinkles TV's knobs, people will queue up to watch. Max is challenging because it looks at the world in unorthodox ways. Europeans poke fun at their institutions as second nature, but that's not a habit here." (Quoted in Waters, 1987)

The program challenges an unnegotiated acceptance of commercial manipulation at two levels - first, through the unfolding of the narrative, the second through elements of

self-reflexivity. Two particular examples relating to the first episode on "blipverts" outline this. In the first, Bryce is in a teleconference with Network 23's executive board. To illustrate the "blipvert problem" he shows a computer graphic model of an experiment. Against a black video background, we can (along with the boardmembers) observe a standardized television viewing module: An line drawing of the "typical" overweight viewer in an easy chair sitting passively in front of the tube. The stream of characters "BUY-BUY-BUY" flows from the screen towards the viewer. We then cut to a second graphic, a cross-section of the viewer's nervous system, which explodes as a result of the overstimulatiton. The ideological message here operates at two levels, one suggesting the venality of the corporate system, through the ensuing discussion of the cost-benefit problems associated with continuing the blipverts; the second, a rather savage view of commercials themselves as manipulative and even potentially life-threatening.

The formal aspects of this segment bear examination as well. The boardroom itself is in deep shadow, the characters lit from below so as to play on the familiar film-noir codes of sinister characterization and masked intent. The establishing shots are done with a wide-angle, deep-focus lens which foreshortens the perspective. Bryce, the tech wizard, is shown in an extreme, image distorting close-up, larger than life and looking down from a superior position at the members of the board. His background of loose pieces of unidentifiable electronic hardware both identifies his trade and reinforces the characterization of the scientist

locked away in the lab, isolated from the larger moral and cultural issues in inherent in his labor.

The use of the simple graphic display reinforces the emphasis of Bryce's dehumanized approach to scientific activity. There is an association made here that positions the audience member as being no more than two-dimensional, reducible to data, both to the researcher, and to the network executives. This is in sharp contrast with what Edison Carter discovers when he breaks into Bryce's lab. He uncovers a "Rebus Tape" of a lab test of the blipverts. The viewer sketched in graphic is seen in the flesh; wrapped in a lab coat that resembles a straitjacket, he fidgets uncomfortably in his chair. As the tape rolls, we cut away to his subjective position: we see the Blipvert unwind, a frenetic montage of the "Zik-Zak" logo and blow-dried male spokesmodel. As the blipvert ends, we cut back to the "lab" shot. The straitjacket expands, then erupts, the lab subject's skull suddenly disintegrating into a gory death's head. Carter's reaction is that of the shocked viewer: he utters an expletive.

As part of his function as a TV reporter, Carter is constantly connected to his "Control" at the Network by his vidicam, which carries his personal ID, and the network logo as part of its image. In the show, the camera frequently serves as our point of reference within a scene, and is an unusual violation of the fourth wall common to most TV narrative. However, when we see the blipvert tape in Bryce's lab, the vidicam cuts out for several seconds, leaving us alone with Carter in a moment of privileged information.

In the episodes that ran during the Fall of 1988, television was a frequent point of departure for social commentary in the show. One episode covered the theme of a cable network that had developed the technology to capture people's dreams on tape. The implication of the segment was that television was, in effect stealing people's dreams, leaving them without a fantasy life of their own. Another dealt with a program that contained an encoded neurological stimulus that was addictive, causing viewers to abandon all other activities in pursuit of an otherwise unattractive game show, Wackets. One particular moment of intertextual clarity is uncovered when, deprived of his access to the Wackets, Max appears on the Network 23 feed and cries, "I want my Wack-T-V!!," in an obvious echo of MTV's early promotional theme, "I want my MTV!" If the logic of the joke is extended, the implication here is that music video is addictive, parasitic popular culture, an ironic position for a program that owes its existance to the form.

In the same episode, a puzzled producer, watching a news feed of video-addicted viewers desperately excavating their sets from the rubble of a collapsed apartment building comments, "Why are they doing that? Everyone knows sets are given to the poor." The overwhelming presence of television in the society is continually reinforced as a problemmatic, commercial medium, and the role of technology is repeatedly called into question, along with numerous examples of dubious corporate ethics, and the contempt of television programmers for audiences.

A very different picture of television emerges in the Coke campaign. The first two ads in the series replicate the discovery of the Max character in the movie by a group of young white boys and girls, dressed in neat, post-apocalyptic leathers, riding elaborately rigged bicycles. In these commercials by Blade Runner (1982) director Ridley Scott, Max serves as a guide to the adolescent initiation into the secret society of "Cokeology." The commercials play on the adolescent's need to define oneself as an individual in contrast to one's parents and family. Acting by setting up Cokeology as a privileged activity, and by respect, Cokeologists as the initiated, it provides a channel by which the target demographic's desire to forge an identity can be channeled into a pattern of consumption.

In the commercial Max Box the children come across a "cross-hatch generator," they press the "on" switch (an icon of the Coke trademark, similar to the selection button of a vending machine) and Max appears, instantly labeling the kids as Cokeologists through the action of consumption. He doesn't ask them about their status vis-a-vis the product, as their identities are confirmed by the open cans of the product which which each is consuming. The commercial ends when the character Phillip, who initally shows skepticism about Max takes a leadership role by announcing, "Let's take him home." Max is safe to take home to the parents, which in turn becomes the theme of the second commercial in the series.

Max is in Phillip's room, being introduced to a friend. As

Max spurts his Cokeology rap, Phillip's mother comes to the door. Max disappears, before Mom can see what's going on. She interrogates the kids in a friendly way about what they're viewing (the concerned mom). The kids respond with the white lie "An educational program." Mom doesn't really buy the line, but understands that nothing serious is awry. She closes the door, leaving the trio alone. Max reappears, reciting the campaign's theme: "C-C-C-atch the Wave. Coke!" The kids have a secret (Max, New Coke, and Cokelogy) that Mom doesn't know about - the product is somthing special that they have in common, and defines their difference from their parents, the Classic Coke/Diet Coke generation. In addition, it's a difference that doesn't challenge the boundries of the family structure, and one that Mom doesn't have to disapprove of.

Max's spokesbeing role for Coke is in sharp contradiction with his uncontrollable commmentary on Network 23. In the series, the network honchos place pressure to prepare Max to be the presenter for Zik-Zak Corporation, who wants exclusive rights to his image. Max refuses to play along, saying: "Ever wonder why Zik-Zak burgers come in plastic packs? Some of the plastic rubs off on the burger and doubles its nutritional value!" (the same charge might well be leveled at Coke). Outside of the plot, Max indulges in snipes at advertisers in the Hitchcockian mode, leading into a commercial break by announcing the presentation of the winners of an award for the most extravagent waste of money in television. He then presents the "winners," the commercials which follow.

In the last episode to air before cancellation, the closing monologue brought into play the show's low standing in the ratings, as compared to the other network offerings in the same time slot (Friday, 8 PM EST). The bit positioned the show's precarious existence in the context of a battle for ratings, which was a frequent intratextual theme of Network 23. Max, made up to resemble Churchill, intoned, "We will face them on the beaches of M-M-Miami Vice; we will fight them on the streets of Dallas. ...and they will say, this was Max Headroom's finest hour."

While a number of critics have addressed the issue of intertextuality, its oppositional potential is not generally privileged over the textual realism or narrative structure, which are theorized as constraining. Mimi White, discussing the counter-commercials which have been an element of late-night variety shows takes the position that these situate the viewer as a more suceptable and attentive target for the surrounding commercials:

> In a way these shows push program heterogeneity to an extreme, with their skits of variable length, based on a wide variety of television genres, incorporating their own commercials. But this is in turn the ideal structure to secure viewer attention. What more could a commercial sponsor desire than a show that encourages viewers to sit through ads because they are not at first glance distinguishable from the show itself? In fact sponsors clearly exploit the potential continuities. (1985)

White privleges the power of the commercials to attract buyers over the deconstructive effect of the counter-commercials which

expose both the content and the structure of the advertising that follow them. One could just as easily reverse her position, insisting that the placement of the counter-commercials before the real advertising (where experienced viewers know to look for them) serves to neutralize the effect of the spots by serving as an tutorial for the generation of oppositional readings. A more sophisticated interpretation will allow that both may be true, depending on the viewer, and on the context. As it stands, either position is simplistic in and of itself.

Working along a theme similar to White, Colin McArthur (1984) critiques the role of intertextuality in British television advertising, linking it to the camp sensibility, and employing an aberrant decoding of Sontag's Notes on Camp, claims this intertextuality "produce(s) meanings and pleasures which have no point of purchase on the wider social and political life of the society." Again, complexity and contradiction are rejected in favor of an argument for cultural containment.

If one claims that texts' ideological practices have the power to "hail," or address viewers in a specific fashion, then one must also accept the argument that counter-hegemonic messages may operate in the same fashion, drawing the reader's attention in a similar way. John Fiske notes: "The failure of ideological criticism to account for the polysemy of the television text is paralleled by its failure to account for the diversity of Western capitalist society." (1986) David Morley, in his Nationwide Audience study (1980), has shown that readings of television don't

fall into the convenient class categories analysts once thought they would. And recently, Newcomb (1984) has applied the theories of Bakhtin and Volosinov to television, incorporating the concept of heteroglossia and arguing the medium serves as a "cultural forum" reflecting the concerns of the culture at a given time.

He criticizes the hegemonic mode of analysis as too protean:

> Because it is flexible the model is able to respond to challange from criticism, theoretical or experimental, by simply enlarging the scope of containment, expanding the boundries of the hegemonic corral, as it were... Used in this sense, hegemony is merely a synonym for 'ideology' or 'culture,' or for whatever term is used in whatever discipline to stand for the 'natural,' the 'neutral,' the 'taken for granted,' or that which is assumed to be 'unmediated'.

Marxist critics have traditionally privileged the power of narrative closure to delimit oppositional elements. The challenging elements of texts are somehow cancelled out or neutralized by the operation of closure, or contradictorally, by its absence (as in television soaps). David Thorburn, in his recent article Television as an Aesthetic Medium argues for a concept of "concensus narrative" - collaborative in production, conservative in structure, but containing within its domain dialogue regarding the culture:

> If consensus narrative is a site or forum where the culture promulgates its mythologies of self-justification and appropriation, it is also the "liminal space," as the anthropologist Victor Turner names it, where the deepest values and contradictions of the society are articulated and, sometimes understood. (1987)

Douglas Kellner, in an article TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture (1982) argues television necessarily contains contradictory views within its structure, but sees the element of humor as being the primary source of emancipatory potential, and individual shows which contain contradictory elements as being whitewashed by their dramatic structure, particularly elements of closure. I would take a somewhat different position, agreeing with both Kellner and Newcomb on the contradictory lines of discourse within a program, but I would seek to develop Kellner's claim to include an expanded notion of the program as text. As we've seen, it can move across episodes, and indeed across networks (as the ads do).

As viewers encounter the elements of the text across channels and across media over time, the forms of dramatic resolution for a particular episode (which Kellner privileges) seem to me to become less influential as the sum of characterization and theme across time. This seems to be born out in both our memories and our talk about television. We may forget specific episodes and particular plotlines, but have nearly indelible memories of characters such as J.R. Ewing and Groucho Marx. A less clear point is that of textual redundancy: What is the balance between a commercial, repeated and viewed numerous times, and an episode of programming which is generally repeated only once or twice (excepting syndicated programming)? To say commercial repetition simply overpowers the other doesen't take into account the complex

balances in relation to works within texts and the possible differences in attention devoted to them.

The balance of this point of contention ultimately lies with the readers. If, as Umberto Eco theorizes, television is to be viewed as an open text then it follows it is to be seen as polysemic. Television mythologies may point strongly and frequently towards centrality, but the nature of television as a popular medium makes it essential that it contain a multiplicity of meanings. Lawrence Grossberg's (1984) concept of "excorporation" by which subdominant groups may appropriate elements of dominant culture to their own ends helps to illustrate this point in rock music culture. While television has been a whipping boy of cultural criticism for some time, I would posit that emancipation is where you (the reader) find it. Teenagers have said "Max is the voice of our generation, you can trust him." Advertisers are willing to pay for him as well, but this does not a priori determine a mindless connection between advertising and audience behavior.

A key connecting point, which has been insufficiently researched, is the differences in the ways real senders and receivers construct their pictures of each other, and the ways in which these culturally constructed texts fit in to readers' socially constructed worlds. Eric Fouquier (1988) has proposed a "figural" model of communication in which neither the sender, reciever, or message are taken for granted, but rather are positioned and analyzed from each others varying perspectives as

part of a flow of information in a constructed world. It is possible that this is one way out of the dubious methodology of trying to hold one or more parts of the system still, reverting them to two dimensions, while inappropriately privleging another.

Much of the body of work of television criticism depends on problematic anecdotal evidence, drawn from ideosyncratic samples, or from hypothesized ideal readers. Instead of abstract theorizing, detached from an empirical context, we need to spend more time with producers and audiences, either as individuals, or as groups, through interviews, focus groups, and the like, in an effort to come up with a picture of audiences different from that traditionally offered up to us by traditional social science and commercial research. This requires new ways of thinking about how we generate theory, and how we can construct and validate our arguments.

The formal structure of criticism tends to require its own style of narrative closure in which the critic must take a stand "for" or "against" the proposition at hand. In closing, I would like to defer this gratification, to some extent, to a later point in time. The point I've tried to bring across in this essay relates the complex and subtle ways in which a single text may be composed and interpreted on the basis of interest, exposure, sophistication, elements of cultural membership, ability to access media, etc.

While I hope it's clear that I reject a closely determined position of containment, likewise, I do not wish to be

misinterpreted as taking a position for television as a beneficent instrument of liberal pluralism. It is a powerful and important instrument for social consensus. Rather, I feel the balance for or against must be placed with individual readers and particular texts, in specific contexts, and it is only through empirical investigation of their readings in a consistant and systematic fashion that we'll be able to determine the relationships between viewers and texts. The next step is to expand on the work done by British, American, and Continental ethnographic and phenomonological researchers to incorporate more rigorous standards of analysis and interpretation of data, in order to better understand the relationships between encoding and decoding processes.

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1. Along this same line, one of the reasons the network series was ahead of its time, and consequently unsuccessful, was because of its incorporation of quick cut techniques and roving camera movement into the production. Viewers unfamiliar with the visual style often had a difficult time following the action, despite the relative simplicity of the storyline when compared to shows like L.A. Law or Hill Street Blues.

2. In the Cinemax/Channel 4 production, board Chairman Cheviat is presented as having few socially redeeming qualities. In the ABC production, the Chair is deployed as the voice of corporate

responsibility, in contrast to the unscrupulous actions of the head of the competing network.